

# An inevitable consequence of 14 years of Conservative governance

*Kathryn Spicksley*

## **The Lacanian Teacher: education, pedagogy and enjoyment**

Nick Stock and Nick Peim, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2025  
206pp, hardback £34.99, ISBN 978 3 0319 3017 1

What do people enjoy about teaching? Why do people become – and remain – teachers, when teaching can be difficult, frustrating, terrifying, boring, on some days all at once? Most of my research centres on why people leave teaching. I seem to read ad infinitum about how new teachers become overwhelmed by workload, frustrated by student behaviour, disappointed with levels of collegial support, and quickly lose their ideals and enthusiasm faced with endless mounds of paperwork and data entry. Sometimes I wonder whether the question shouldn't be 'why do teachers leave?' but rather 'why do teachers stay?'

Of course, anyone who has taught – and who has enjoyed teaching – will understand the pull of the classroom. For the last few years I have been primarily employed as a researcher, but occasionally I am asked to teach. On facing any class I have been put in front of, I always feel a deep sense of dread. I watch the clock tick down to the time my lecture begins, nervously sipping my coffee and wondering if someone – a proper teacher – might rush in at the last minute and put me out of my misery: 'Hey Dr Spicksley – you're off the hook! I've got this! You can stand down and go back to reading, alone, in the library!'. Salvation never arrives and at the appointed time I have to put on a smile, start teaching and hope for the best ... and of course, as soon as I start to teach, I start to feel that little frisson of excitement that comes with taking on the role of the teacher. I can't quite put my finger on why I enjoy it so much, particularly given my previous dread. But I do – as every teacher knows, there's nothing quite like the excitement of stepping into that unique place of the teacher.

Why do I start with this reflection? Because Stock and Peim describe this experience, and in a way that I have rarely found elsewhere in the literature. 'There is an erotics to teaching, an enjoyment that is to be found in few other places. This erotics is not meant in the quotidian sense of the word, but rather, psychoanalytically speaking a space in which our drives can be directed, a place of enjoyment that is thrilling and terrifying' (p6). And with that, the reader is thrown into the generally uncharted territory of Lacanian theory. Although frequently used by poststructural theorists, including Lee Edelman

and Judith Butler, the work of the controversial French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is not commonly found in the realm of education studies. *The Lacanian Teacher* works to address this gap – and rightfully so, as Lacan’s work on desire, symbolic meanings and the messiness of reality has much to offer for the educationalist, particularly in times when education policy might seem to be specifically designed to induce hysteria.

*The Lacanian Teacher* is not, however, an easy read, particularly for the social scientist. It takes its inspiration not from the structured argument of a sociological essay, with the literature review, the method, the findings and conclusion. Instead it draws from works in cultural studies, weaving references to novels and films in and amongst personal reflections from the authors and references to psychoanalytical texts. In doing so, it asks more difficult questions of the teacher than most educational texts, and these questions are forgotten, reiterated and inverted throughout, resisting linear progress. However, despite the frequent calls made by the authors to abandon ‘[t]heo-educational laws, the will to save, redeem, complete the subject’ (p160), the teacher reading may feel – somewhat ironically – that they have learned something important about themselves by the end. This book will not tell you how to become a better teacher, but it will make you question why exactly that particular desire is so important to you.

*The Lacanian Teacher* is an important read right now, because after 14 years of Conservative education governance there seems to be an apparent refusal by the incoming Labour administration to reverse its worst elements. News that year 8s will soon be subject to a mandatory reading test to ‘drive up standards’, according to the Department for Education, confirms a lack of political imagination and integrity here.<sup>1</sup> Despite increasing concerns about mental health for both students and teachers, a decision has been made to introduce yet another accountability measure. Given that I have been assured that all children can now read because of the previous administration’s heavy-handed phonics policies,<sup>2</sup> the introduction of this test raises important questions about the purpose of education and the role of the teacher. Such questions go beyond the usual, instrumental ‘how can we raise standards?’ and ‘how can we do our best for every child?’ and instead strike at the heart of what it does, and could, mean to be a teacher. I am sure that Stock and Peim would agree with me, that perhaps it is only psychoanalysis that can propel us to a fresh understanding of why people continue to teach, and to gain enjoyment from teaching, under such conditions. *The Lacanian Teacher* feels to me like an inevitable consequence of post-2010 education policy; in England, teachers (and teacher educators) have been pushed to accept and enact an extreme version of didactic instruction. In such a climate, what desire, what motivation, can be found to continue teaching?

Like Edelman before them, Stock and Peim ask their readers to imagine teaching stripped of the heavy burden of the future, in which the ‘child remains the perpetual horizon of any acknowledged politics’.<sup>3</sup> Teaching instead becomes oriented around the

present: the *jouissance* of navigating the constant struggle of becoming a teacher, in which – at any given time – the everyday horror of the real can destabilise and threaten our idealistic desires to become masters of our craft. It is rare to find a text that explains these complex and often contradictory issues in teaching with such clarity. It is doubtless a critical text, but one that is strangely optimistic in its call for teachers to enjoy ‘the space of education, its stage, its impossible relationality, its desires, its fantasies ... in divergent ways’ (p183). In England, in 2026 – a time and space in which teaching and teaching education have been narrowed to a claustrophobic degree – such calls provide a welcome antidote to the prevailing discourse on education.

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## Notes

1. See: Department for Education, ‘Focus on reading in secondary years to drive up standards’, London, DfE, 15 October 2025: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/focus-on-reading-in-secondary-years-to-drive-up-standards>.
2. Nick Gibb and Robert Peal, *Reforming Lessons: why English schools have improved since 2010 and how this was achieved*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2026.
3. Lee Edelman, *No Future: queer theory and the death drive*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2004, p3.